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PLAY, DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION AND GAMES

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OPENING UP WINDOWS TO THE WORLD

Fifth graders in a public school in New Jersey participate in an unusual simulation game. During lunch-time, food is brought in. One-third of the students get a rich meal, including fruits, sodas, cake and ice cream. The other part receive a small amount of water and stale bread. The uproar that follows forms the emotional basis for a discussion on world hunger.

In Denmark, pre-school children put together the wooden pieces of a jigsaw puzzle -- not an uncommon spectacle. Unusual, however, are the pictures, which depict an Afghan tent, a Thai house on stilts, an adobe house in Mexico. Psychologists argue that this kind of exercise enhances perspective-taking, an essential ability in the development of pro-social behaviour.

These simple games are not isolated events. They relate to efforts of teachers and other child-oriented persons all over the world who are involved in making their friends aware of their place on earth and of how their lives are part of a larger global, interdependent system. These efforts are not a matter of play or games only. In addition, exhibitions are held, funds collected, and foreign speakers enlisted.

Geography and history are scrutinised for ethnocentric falsifications. For example, the familiar Mercator projection of the world appears to disadvantage the developing nations. Also, America did exist before Columbus

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Central in all of this is the relationship between the rich and poor countries. Students discover that a western European or North American child may need 60 times as much energy as his Indian peer, or they learn that many of the countries which suffer from famine are actually major agricultural exporters to the industrialized nations.

The very saddening fact that 15 million children die in pure misery every year is no longer disposed of as something pertaining only to the "developing world", but is increasingly perceived to be a failing of all of humankind.

The vision emerges that the abolishment of "underdevelopment" is in the self interest of all peoples and nations. The Russian presence in Cuba, for instance, has traditionally been taken by American politicians to be a major threat to U.S. security in the Caribbean. Concern now focusses as well, however, on the massive abject poverty in the region and its dangerous, and potentially explosive nature.

We have now reached the stage where the very survival of all human beings has become a global problem, making all of us members of a world community. The participants in this community must develop their sense of responsibility towards each other and towards future generations. Self-fulfilment in a broad global context expands in meaning and implies a respect for the right of other peoples also to fulfil themselves.

Today's world is still not a place where everybody can achieve his potential. Let us again look for a moment at the condition of children. Thirty percent of the children in the developing world die before the age of five. A quarter of a million go blind every year from lack of vitamin A. Only awareness and understanding of what these figures entail and a personal commitment to development will entitle us to call ourselves members of a world community. And this, to a great extent, is what "development education" is all about.

UNDER-DEVELOPMENT IS NOT "THEIR" PROBLEM

Development education is not a privilege reserved for the so-called "developed" nations. Working on development issues should, of course, be the concern of each individual and every nation. Yet in the developed world, development education may be interpreted in a special way, not only because the rich nations are major donors to development organizations like UNICEF, but also for other serious reasons. Development education relates to the particular connection between the developed and developing

world. Most people in the high income countries ignore this relationship and conveniently look upon under-development as a situation that prevails mainly "out there", in a world far from their own. In its most restricted but still much too popular version, under-development is explained in terms of harsh climatic conditions, proneness to natural disasters, lack of resources, or even in terms of a typical psychological 'set-up' of the peoples living in the Third World.

More progressive outlooks may take the stifling effects of a colonial past into account. However, only a few people in the developed nations are willing to acknowledge that many of the present-day mechanisms that maintain under-development in developing nations originate in the developed world.

Take the Sahel as an example. The drought scourging the region was not only a natural disaster, but had a definite man-made component. The nomads would probably have been able to fend for themselves, as they had for centuries, if large tracts of their previous grazing grounds had not been taken away for the cultivation of ground nuts for Europe. It may not come as a great surprise that during the drought the harvest of ground nuts set record heights.

That the developed world, to a significant extent, maintains "under-development" in the Third World may startle many people. Yet it is the message that emerges over and over again from many reports and research findings on under-development, and in almost every encounter with the developing nations.

Considered from this perspective, development education acquires a new dimension. It does not limit its scope to the predicament of the Third World's poor only; it also directly challenges the life-style of people in the industrially-advanced nations. In other words, development co-operation or foreign assistance should occur at home as well.

CHILDREN: A SPECIAL TARGET GROUP

Usually adults are drawn into the discussion on development issues, and the reasons are obvious. Adults have more options for active participation. They can vote, form action groups, regulate their consumption patterns, contribute financially and grasp the intricacies of international questions. Children are mainly outside all of this. There is less opportunity for children to effectively act or participate in complex discussions.

Nonetheless, there is a renewed interest in reaching the child. It's understood that much of what is at stake is ultimately based upon attitudes. A pro-social disposition towards others, the willingness to review one's own situation, or an interest in global issues: these are the sort of attitudes which are still open to growth and enrichment in children, but are hard to alter in grown-ups. There's strong evidence that these attitudes are pretty much fixed by the time the individual reaches the age of 14 or 15. Recent child research even suggests that the pattern is set during early infancy. For these reasons, educators like to focus on children. In their minds, of course, too, is the awareness of what children will become -- the subsequent generation of voters and consumers.

What this means in practical terms is that most development education efforts are directed at the 9-12 year age group. These youngsters are still young enough not to be completely set in their habits, yet are sufficiently mature to process relatively complex information.

I hasten to say, however, that techniques to reach the much younger child are rapidly progressing. Games and play can have a significant role in these attempts.

LITTLE INPUT FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

On the whole, the social sciences have not paid much attention to development education. It has mainly been the work of concerned people -- journalists, religious leaders, teachers, volunteers and organizers of action groups -- who have pointed out the necessity of a global perspective in the education of children.

It is largely this group who has produced, in addition to a great deal of good will, an impressive amount of material on Third World issues. Their enthusiasm is, however, coupled with a rather limited understanding of ultimate behavioural goals, corresponding learning processes, attitude formation and didactic means and methods. Yet their accumulated experiences offer sufficient room for useful theorizing and possibly helpful guidelines for social research.

GAMES AND PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

A first strong suggestion that arises is that development education calls for an educational climate that stimulates pro-social behaviour.

This is not too remarkable, since qualifications such as interest in others, empathy, concern and altruism are clearly pro-social attitudes and of vital importance in the development of a global outlook.

An analysis of the genesis of pro-social behaviour leads to interesting thoughts, particularly when comparing it with the effects games and play are said to have on the behaviour of children.

Children who can be described as "pro-social" seem to have experienced a totally different kind of education than children who can be called "anti-social". Let me summarize the most striking differences:

- Pro-social children have a positive self-image.
- They experience the locus of control of their behaviour mainly in themselves.
- They have had sufficient opportunity to try themselves out and to undergo various behavioural roles.
- They have significantly interacted with adults, either their parents, family members, teachers or persons in the neighbourhood.
- They know models who actually show pro-social behaviour.
- Most conducive to the growth of social behaviour is a co-operative climate as opposed to a competitive one.

You will at once recognize that games and play carry the potential of bringing about these conditions. Games, indeed, seem to bolster children's self-image, make them active learners, let them experience their own capabilities, and stimulate social interaction. They can lead to co-operation and a better relationship with adults. Particularly the role- or perspective-taking qualities of simulation practices can contribute to the growth of pro-social behaviour.

So in this round-about way, games and play strengthen development education processes. Even without moving into specific development issues, professional "gamers" can be extremely instrumental in promulgating games and play that foster pro-social behaviour. This call gains importance when it is realized that anti-social behaviour forms the biggest urban educational problem in the industrialized world today.

I am aware of recent warnings expressed by game theorists who caution against the possible negative effects that games, especially simulation activities, may have on the self-esteem,

the ability to appreciate others, and the morale of players. Apparently this danger is most acute with those players who perform losing or vulnerable roles or ones too much at variance with their roles as regular students or members of the group.

It is exactly this kind of criticism that is needed to improve the quality of development education gaming techniques. It also shows that your expertise is needed to counter these contrary consequences.

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AND GAMES

Another pertinent issue deals with the position of development education in the total educational system. Until now the thrust of development education efforts has been toward the formal education system. The school is almost universally seen as the most suitable place for development education activities. Its usually centralized system of students, teachers, textbooks and curricula seems to provide the ideal soil for development education cultivation. Although I cannot cite completely convincing data, my hunch is that most educators who think along these lines slip into managerial or organizational schemes instead of following educational principles.

Indeed, from an administrative point of view, aiming at schools seems logical. But not only are schools resistant to change and, in reality, fairly hard to reach, but what matters more are the persuasive indications that basic attitudes are largely formed outside the schools: out on the streets, with peer groups and inside the family.

Certainly it's important that textbooks carry appropriate information, and a lot can be done to improve the formal school situation, but the non- and informal systems must not be ignored. It's obvious that play and games can be exceedingly operational here. Their informal, entertaining, variable and flexible features -- including their relatively inexpensive nature -- make them applicable in almost every setting.

Little creativity is required to think up a whole gamut of ways to get games to children: they can appear in church or youth group magazines or be provided in community centres; they can be attached to all kinds of food wrappers, such as cereal boxes, or even packaged along with a pair of new sneakers. The trick, of course, is to design games that fit well with these carriers, attract attention and are fun to play. But this chore is well within your reach. In this connection, I would also like to plead that you exert your good efforts to increase the physical play facilities for children.

DIDACTICS AND MATERIALS: AN EXIGUITY OF GAMES

Development education work with children has been a matter of trial and error to a large extent. Systematic research efforts on its didactic principles have been few and far between. What has become distinctly clear, however, is that development education is not a subject that can be taught on top of the curriculum, or as a separate part of it, or as a little something extra at a Boy Scouts' meeting. It is more a way of life or a perspective or way of looking at things that pervades through the whole school and all its lessons, or the entire group structure.

Experience with a variety of teaching and student aids gives a rather coherent picture.

- Development education material should give a positive image of developing nations. A "pornography of the poor" approach may arouse strong emotions and incite children to collect money, but will eventually put them off.
- The material should help children to identify themselves with other children and their living conditions. It should give them the impression that if they had been born in a developing nation, they would have behaved in a roughly similar fashion.
- For this reason, biographic material, novels, dramas and individualized concrete texts, preferably in the present tense, are effective. Information with a direct bearing on their lives, and, for example, featuring pets, hobbies or dress, is welcomed.
- The child needs ample opportunity for action. Making handicrafts, cooking Third World recipes, singing songs are liked. And there are, of course, initiatives like running a newsletter, setting up exhibits, or fund-raising activities.

A lot of the present material centers heavily on individual children from individual countries and displays in tangible words and pictures the daily life of a child and his or her developing nation's culture. "Abdul of Egypt" and "Margarita from Colombia" would be typical headings for such material.

This approach is understandable as it often serves as a concrete introduction to a developing country and may, in the school, be used in a social science course. From a cognitive-psychological viewpoint, it's likely that soon this sort of

material will be complemented by a more thematic, or issue-oriented strategy. Accumulated information about various individual nations may easily blur the young mind, whereas the more comprehensive knowledge offered in international themes and issues will sharpen the child's vision of what's going on in the world as a whole.

The international scene offers numerous suggestions for such themes:

- rights of the child
- hunger
- interdependence
- child labour
- cultural diversity
- appropriate technology
- cultural universals
- infant feeding
- energy
- world trade

...and so forth.

Games and play surely are favourite choices as vehicles to present these issues. Many of the topics mentioned could be readily incorporated into games, especially into simulation activities or into role play. Yet games that focus exclusively on the conditions of Third World children or on development questions are rare. Even more rare are games for younger children, and the younger the child, the less is available. Short, cheap, self-generating, and yet powerful games that can be easily multiplied or put together and used by the young child are almost non-existent.

CONCERN FOR ONE'S OWN COMMUNITY

In development education, a new trend is discernible which may well quickly pick up momentum. It concerns relating the home situation to conditions in developing nations. In this approach it's recognized that so-called "Third World" conditions can also be found in one's own neighbourhood, community or nation. It stands to reason that development education efforts should deal with these "real world" situations also. Working with minority groups, handicapped persons or elderly or disadvantaged people increases the relevance of development education. It also clarifies the problems of developing nations. It presents them as more universal and reduces the chances of a dangerous "we/they" dichotomy.

Often one's own personal situation can be used to increase understanding of Third World problems, or, the other way around, events in a developing nation can be discussed to explain conditions at home. This new approach should be welcomed by game designers and users, because the introduction of community and home-related aspects may strengthen the reality value of games.

THIRD WORLD INPUT AND INDIGENOUS GAMES

Another course, if not checked at the outset, may in the long run jeopardise the objectives of development education. It deals with the players in the development education arena themselves. As it looks now, particularly in the developed nations, almost all the people explicitly involved are from these nations. As such, development education may well remain a thing for "First Worlders" by "First Worlders", and almost resemble a form of self-pollination. It's mandatory that in the discussion on development education the developing nations remain outspoken participants. This is why UNICEF with its presence in 110 developing nations and its staff in and from these nations can help to foster a proper dialogue.

On the games level, developing nations may provide a significant contribution. They have their treasure of indigenous games to offer. Indigenous games are comparable to the traditional common street games found in the Western countries which are now almost completely lost. A recent survey in Afghanistan, for instance, revealed more than 400 different games. Indigenous games are of a vast variety and touch upon all aspects of human life and development, and also run from simple activities to complex exercises. A major feature of them is that they are accessible to all, they cost nothing, all that is usually required being a handful of pebbles or sticks, and they can be played everywhere. A most important consequence for development education is that by playing these games the children may spontaneously develop a sense of genuine appreciation for them, and for the cultures of their origin. The common street games are beautiful examples in themselves of how differences between cultures can be bridged.

Games specialists will find a true treasure-trove here. Its exploitation will, in this case, not lead to the usual depletion of Third World resources, but indeed to mutual benefit -- and, hopefully, understanding.